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ABSTRACT

This report examines high school education in Colorado, noting the high (and underreported) level of student attrition and the achievement of those who remain. Over 40 percent of Colorado's high school students never graduate. About 15 percent of this attrition can be accounted for by published dropout statistics. Actual attrition rates, however, are much higher than reported because many dropouts are counted as transfer students. Among those who remain in school, achievement on CSAPs declines as students progress from elementary through high school. The poor performance of high schools overall disproportionately affects minority students, especially urban minorities. African American and Hispanic 10th graders are twice as likely as white students to score below proficient in reading and 25-50 percent more likely to score below proficient in math. Minority students are more likely to attend high schools rated below average. Little is being done to remedy the situation. Colorado school districts operate in relative isolation from one another, so promising programs are unlikely to be made widely available. The report suggests that Coloradans have the collective capacity to address these issues effectively and calls for the creation of a commission dedicated to examining and re-thinking high school education and promoting reforms tailored to the needs of individual districts. (SM)

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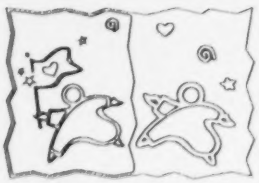
a call for high school reform



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The need for a successful high school education has never been greater. Yet high schools in Colorado and throughout the country are not meeting the needs of vast numbers of students. In this paper, we take a hard look at high school education in Colorado. What we find is an ailing system. First we look at the surprisingly high—and under-reported—student attrition, and then we look at the achievement of those who remain.

Over 40% of Colorado's high school students never make it to graduation. About 15% of this attrition can be accounted for by published dropout statistics. But actual attrition rates are much higher than reported because many students who have dropped out are counted as **transfer students**. Transfer students are considered to have moved into other educational settings, but are still considered to be on track to earn a high school diploma or GED. However, as we show in this paper, the purported attrition as a result of the transfer of tens of thousands of students from Colorado high schools between 9th and 12th grades is statistically implausible.

Among those who remain in school, achievement on CSAPs declines as students progress from elementary through high school. The poor performance of high schools overall disproportionately affects minority students, especially in urban centers. African-American and Hispanic 10th graders are twice as likely to score below Proficient than are Anglo students in reading, and 25%-50% more likely than Anglo students to score below Proficient in math. Minority students are more likely than Anglo students to attend high schools rated **below Average** on 2002 School Accountability Reports.

Although high schools lose massive amounts of students from the system and the achievement gap threatens to grow into a chasm, little is being done to reverse current realities. Colorado school districts operate in relative isolation from one another, so that promising programs, were they to emerge, are unlikely to be made widely available. The energetic rhetoric of the 2001 **Closing the Gap** resolution has not been matched by energetic funding. **Closing the Gap** initiatives remain unfunded; furthermore, no constellation of state policies exists that directly targets high school students.

Coloradoans have the collective capacity to address these issues effectively. We therefore call for the creation of a Commission dedicated to examining and re-thinking high school education and promoting reforms tailored to the needs of individual districts, particularly those in urban settings. Such a Commission would be comprised of policy makers, business leaders, professors, community leaders, and state and district educators. The Commission would be charged with developing action-oriented, fundable, and immediate strategies to address high school engagement, retention and achievement.

A concerted effort, such as the proposed Commission, is necessary if we hope to address the systemic issues that underlie poor high school performance and the widening learning gap between Anglo students and minorities. Our collective commitment to such an effort would constitute our greatest hope.

A CALL FOR HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

COLORADO SMALL SCHOOLS INITIATIVE
AT THE COLORADO CHILDREN'S CAMPAIGN

March 2003

In Colorado, 2001 **Closing the Gap** resolution states that:

> "...Closing the learning gap is an important goal of Colorado's education reform program." Closing the Gap, Colorado Joint House Resolution 01-1014, 2001.

The resolution sounds promising, but what does it mean? In this paper, we illustrate what "the learning gap" looks like nationally and in Colorado. Our data point to some disturbing conclusions. First, achievement declines as students move from elementary school to middle school to high school. Evidence suggests that high schools not only fail to close the achievement gap but that they are actually contributing to it. The gap in achievement and educational attainment (that is, completion of high school and college) between minorities and Anglo students is wide and widening, disproportionately affecting urban, low-income, minority students.

In Colorado, 2001 *Closing the Gap* resolution states that:

"...closing the learning gap is an important goal of Colorado's education reform program."

This paper uses a range of existing data to "take the temperature" of high schools. As we'll see, the system is ailing. We find, unfortunately, that the nobly stated aims of the **Closing the Gap** resolution stand in stark contrast to realities reflected throughout Colorado high schools. Perhaps the most distressing finding is that little is being done to address the inequities emerging in our high schools. Discrepancies between minorities and Anglo students in attrition and achievement rates are well documented. Although the dimensions of the achievement gap are common knowledge among educators and legislators, Colorado lacks effective strategies for addressing the problems.

The problems that create and exacerbate the achievement gap are systemic and complex. They are bigger than any single school district or state agency can, in and of itself, overcome. However, if we combine the efforts of educators, policy makers, business leaders, foundation representatives, and parents, we can transform the culture of poor achievement and low expectations that characterize current high schooling in Colorado.

the need for a high school education

To fully understand the seriousness of the problem, we need to understand the importance of a high school education. Data on the value of a high school education are unequivocal. In this section, we look at some of those data, which indicate that the need for completing high school has never been greater.

Research from several sources confirms what most of us already know: the demand and the pervasiveness of information technology in nearly every element of the economy require higher levels of reading and math literacy than ever before in our nation's history. In the past, there were always decent jobs for those without strong literacy skills. But those jobs have virtually disappeared. In 1973, for example, 36% of workers in skilled, blue-collar jobs had no high school diploma, and 14% of clerical workers had no high school diploma. By 1998, only 11% of blue-collar workers and 4% of clerical workers lacked a high school diploma.[1] To be clear, these statistics do not reflect an increase in the number of those completing high school (the numbers are dropping), but a decrease in the number of jobs available to those without a high school diploma.

Using U.S. Department of Education statistics, the Alliance for Excellent Education reports striking differences in employment rates based on level of education. They report that 8 in 10 adults with bachelor's degrees are employed, compared to 6 in 10 among those who only completed high school. Of those who dropped out of high school, only 4 in 10 are employed.[2]

UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION LEVEL

	UNEMPLOYMENT RATES*			
Ethnicity:	**High School Dropout**	**High School Graduate**	**AA Degree**	**BA/BS Degree Or Higher**
All	6.4%	3.5%	2.3%	1.7%
Anglo	5.6%	3.0%	2.1%	1.6%
African-Am.	10.7%	6.5%	3.5%	2.5%
Hispanic	6.3%	3.9%	2.9%	2.2%

* Ages 25 and older

[1] Anthony Carnevale, *Help Wanted...College Required*, Educational Testing Service (ETS), 2001.

[2] Alliance for Excellent Education, *Every Child A Graduate: A Framework for Excellent Education For All Middle and High School Students*, September 2002.

[3] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2001*, NCES 2000-130. Table 381. Available at: http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/digest2001/.

...not surprisingly, as education attainment increases, so does income...

As the table on page 3 shows, unemployment rates are nearly double among those in each ethnic group who have graduated high school compared to those who haven't.[4] Although gaps persist between Anglos compared to African-Americans and Hispanics based on level of education, these gaps become less pronounced as educational attainment rises. Not surprisingly, as education attainment increases, so does income, as illustrated in the chart below.

Not only do those with less education earn less than those with more education, their wages are slipping compared to those with more education. **Education Week** reports that wages of 30-year old males with a high school diploma declined from $27,700 in 1983 to $23,000 in 1993 (all in 1993 dollars), and continues to drop. Wages of college-educated workers have either remained the same or risen.[5] The Educational Testing Service (ETS) reports that success in today's "knowledge-based" economy requires "virtually all" workers to gain some post secondary education.[6]

ANNUAL EARNINGS BASED ON LEVEL OF EDUCATION[7]

LEVEL OF EDUCATION	AVERAGE EARNINGS MEN	AVERAGE EARNINGS WOMEN
High School Dropout	$25,035	$17,015
High School Graduate	$33,184	$23,061
AA Degree	$48,638	$27,757
BA Degree	$52,985	$37,993

The bottom line is this: education still remains the primary means of attaining equal economic opportunity in this country. Furthermore, economic demands are such that the levels of education required to be competitive in today's workforce are greater than they were 50 and even 20 years ago. Practically speaking, success depends not only on earning a high school diploma, but on at least two years of a college education as well. A high school diploma is a critical stepping-stone towards economic success, but as the next section reveals, large numbers of students aren't provided equal opportunities to make that step.

[4] Data for Colorado were not available for this report, but there is no reason to believe that the scenario within the state would be very different from what we find nationally.

[5] *Education Week*, "Getting Serious About School," April 11, 2001.

[6] Anthony Carnevale, *Help Wanted...College Required*, Educational Testing Service (ETS), 2001, as cited in Michael Cohen, Aspen Institute, *Transforming the American High School: New Directions for State & Local Policy*, 2001.

[7] Alliance for Excellent Education, *Every Child A Graduate: A Framework for Excellent Education For All Middle and High School Students*, September 2002.

HIGH SCHOOLS ARE AILING: IN COLORADO & ACROSS THE U.S.

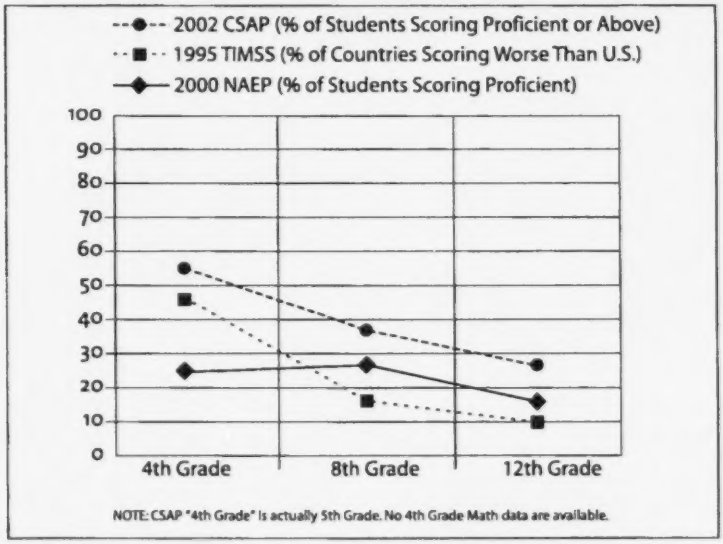
Research and policy documents in recent years confirm a disturbing and undeniable reality: high schools are failing to fulfill their promise of effectively providing equal educational opportunities to its citizens. Statistics reveal that the level and quality of secondary education are not meeting the demand for increased math and reading literacy. As discouraging as national statistics are, the numbers within Colorado are even worse, particularly for low-income, minority students. While Colorado's reported graduation rate hovers around 80%, graduation rates of African Americans and Hispanics average 65%. In predominately urban districts, the reported graduation rates drop as low as 53%.[8] This represents a dropout rate of between 35%-50% among low-income, minority, and predominately urban students. As we'll show in the next section, the actual rates are even lower. Equally disturbing, many of those who do complete high school are nevertheless unprepared to achieve success in the economy of the 21st century.

The most reliable statistics that estimate U.S. achievement compared to other countries are provided by The Third International Mathematics & Science Study (TIMSS), the most recent of which was administered in 1995. Those data show some discouraging trends. Although U.S. fourth graders scored better than fourth graders from 46% other countries, twelfth graders scored better than students from only 10% of other countries, suggesting that as students progress towards secondary education, the achievement gap widens.[9]

[8] Colorado Department of Education (CDE), *Colorado Graduation & Completer Rates for the Class of 2001 by Racial/Ethnic Group & Gender.*

[9] Education Trust, *Thinking K-16: Add It Up*, v6, Issue #1, Summer 2002.

DECLINING MATH ACHIEVEMENT AMONG U.S. STUDENTS ELEMENTARY THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL*



*Adapted from Education Trust, Thinking K-16: Add It Up, v6, n1, Summer 2002

Comparisons of students within the United States are often based on statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Most recent (2000) NAEP statistics show trends similar to TIMSS. Not only do students' scores drop as they get older, but performance worsens only slightly in middle school while dropping significantly in high school. One researcher concludes that close to half of all 17-year olds cannot read or do math at the level needed to get a job in a modern automobile plant.[10]

Some lament that there is nothing to be done—that the achievement gap between Anglos and minority students is the inevitable result of societal inequities that schools cannot overcome.[11] But after a focused effort in the 1980's the achievement gap between Anglos and African-Americans and Hispanics did, in fact, narrow. But by 1999, due, we believe, to a languishing policy agenda, the gap had again widened.[12] Now, as a group, 17-year old African-Americans and Hispanics have reading skills similar to those of 13-year old Anglo students.[13]

[10] Richard Murname & Frank Levy, *Teaching the New Basic Skills: Principles for Educating Children to Thrive in a Changing Economy*, 1997.

[11] See *Education Week*, "Getting Serious About School," April 11, 2001.

[12] Education Trust, *Thinking K-16: Youth At the Crossroads: Facing High School & Beyond*, v5, Issue #1, Winter 2001.

[13] Education Trust, *Thinking K-16: New Frontiers for a New Century*, v5, Issue #2, Spring 2001.

U.S. STUDENTS' DECLINING NAEP MATH PERFORMANCE (2000)[14]			
	% Students Scoring BELOW Proficient		
ETHNICITY	GRADE 4	GRADE 8	GRADE 12
All	75%	74%	84%
Anglo	67%	66%	79%
African-Am.	95%	95%	97%
Hispanic	90%	91%	96%

Our concentrated efforts can make a difference, but we will need more than words to address the issues. Sadly, national trends have not been evaded in Colorado, and, in fact, our own report card ranks low compared to that of most states. The following facts speak for themselves:

- CSAP Math scores of Colorado children steadily decline from 55% **Proficient or Above** in 5th Grade to 27% **Proficient or Above** in 10th Grade. CSAP Reading overall remains relatively stable, with 65% of 10th Graders scoring **Proficient or Above**. However, while scores of Anglo students improve, those of African-Americans and Hispanics remain the same.[15]
- Colorado ranks last among all states in terms of the participation of low-income 18-24 year olds attending college. In 1999, 13.7% of low-income students attended college, compared to a national average during the same period of 24.5%.[16]
- Colorado is one of only two states with no graduation requirements or guidelines. (Standards don't substitute for graduation guidelines: all but one state has standards.)[17] "Local control" laws limit our ability to set clear and high graduation expectations for all students.
- In 2001, Colorado legislators passed the **Closing the Gap** resolution that resolves to close the achievement gap in Colorado. To date, that initiative has received no legislative funding beyond that which already exists for CSAPs and the collection of District Accreditation Reports. Colorado has no state-level programs in place targeted at improving achievement among high school students.[18]

[14] Education Trust, *Thinking K-16: Add It Up*, v6, Issue #1, Summer 2002.

[15] CDE 2002 CSAP State Summary (Math & Reading)

[16] Presentation from Colorado Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Higher Education. Bruce Benson, Chair; Rep. Gayle Berry, Vice Chair. James Jacobs, Tom Mortenson, John Bliss, Robert Moore, and Rich Allen. November 6, 2001.

[17] National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2003. Available at: http://www.education.umn.edu/nceo/.

[18] Colorado Department of Education. See http://www.cde.state.co.us.

A CLOSER LOOK AT COLORADO'S LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Our inattention to high school achievement across the state has disproportionately impacted Colorado's African-American and Hispanic populations. This is most clearly seen in our urban centers. In this section, we illustrate how our inattention to high school attrition and achievement threatens to turn an already pronounced gap into a chasm. First, we look at the effects of the achievement gap in terms of those who don't complete high school. What we will find is that all the data converge: rather than being places where educational opportunity is equalized, students are losing ground. The achievement gap is widening rather than narrowing, and it's wider at the top of the educational system than it is at the bottom.

...the achievement gap is widening rather than narrowing, and it's wider at the top of the educational system than it is at the bottom...

attrition as a symptom: looking past misleading graduation & dropout statistics

On first blush, dropout statistics don't look too bad: only 2.9% dropout rate throughout Colorado overall in 2000-01. District-reported dropout statistics range from 0%-6%. These are the numbers you read in the newspaper. Yet such statistics are not credible given other statistics surrounding known rates of those with no high school diploma. In the 2000-01 year (when the Colorado Department of Education reported an overall dropout rate of 2.9%), census data reported that 12.1% of 16-19 year olds in Colorado were not in school and had not earned a diploma. In urban centers, the discrepancies are even greater. For example, in 2000-01, Adams County School District reported an average high school dropout rate of 2.4%.[19] Yet 2000 Census data revealed that 19.9% of all 16-19 year olds in the county were not enrolled in school and were not a high school graduate.[20]

There are two reasons why these numbers do not align. The single digit figures reported by schools, districts, and the state count the number of students in any given year who are known to have dropped out. But these numbers are a relatively small proportion of the cumulative total of those who fail to continue their education across several years. The following table shows the annual and cumulative dropout rates for the Colorado-wide Class of 2001. As the table shows, the annual dropout rate is low: never over 5%. Nevertheless, the cumulative total of reported dropouts of the Class of 2001 is nearly 15%, or approximately 10,000 students from the Class of 2001.

But the story doesn't end there. Notice the enrollment each year as students progress from the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior classes. Each year, the class loses between 4,500 and 9,000 students, for a total attrition count of 27,570 students across the four years—41% of the original 9th grade Class of 2001. And yet, only 9,779 (less than 15%) of the class is accounted for through dropout figures. Where did the other 17,791—or 26% of the original Class of 2001—go?

[19] CDE: 5-Year Trend Dropout Rates Including Alternative Schools: 1996-97 to 2000-01.

[20] Census 2000 Summary File (SF3); GCT-P11: Language, School Enrollment and Educational Attainment

ANNUAL & CUMULATIVE DROPOUT STATISTICS FOR COLORADO'S CLASS OF 2001*					
	FRESHMEN 1997-98	SOPHOMORES 1998-99	JUNIORS 1999-2000	SENIORS 2000-01	CUMULATIVE TOTALS:
# Students Enrolled in Class of 2001	66,811	59,799	55,206	48,575	39,241 Graduates
# Dropouts	2,446	2,902	2,602	1,829	9,779 Dropouts
% Dropouts	3.7%	4.9%	4.7%	3.8%	14.6%** Dropped out 9th-12th grade

*Data collected from Colorado Department of Education, *Report of Dropout Counts*, 1997-2001.

**Total does not equal the sum of freshmen-senior percentages, since reported annual figures are adjusted based on transfers. This figure is the actual proportion of attrition found when dividing the cumulative number of reported dropouts each year by the total number of students in the original freshman class.

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) accounts for the gap between the reported number of students in a class and the number of dropouts primarily through transfers. Transfers are students who move into and out of school districts or the state school system overall each year, excluding dropouts. We might infer, then, that most of the 17,791 students who didn't make it to the graduation stage and who didn't drop out transferred out-of-state. There are two facts that make this seemingly obvious explanation unlikely.

First, the enrollment in Colorado schools from 1997 through 2001 actually grew by 5%. That it would grow by 5% overall and yet we would lose 26% of the Class of 2001 through out-of-state transfers is statistically implausible. Second, this pattern of attrition from the freshman through senior year is repeated year after year, class after class, in district after district. That is, throughout the state the size of the freshman class in district after district diminishes significantly by the senior year—even when overall district enrollment increases. Statistically speaking, you would expect that if a school district increases or decreases membership overall that the growth or decline would be seen relatively consistently across all grade levels. The fact that high school enrollment steadily declines in the face of district or state growth strongly suggests that there is a systematic, unaccounted for leak of students from the system.[21]

[21] In fact, evidence of this pattern, and this leak, is seen to varying degrees nationally. See, for example, Robert Belfanz & Nettie Legters, *How Many Central City Schools Have a Severe Dropout Problem, Where Are They Located, and Who Attends Them?*, Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, January 2001.

The crux of the issue is that the transfer data are unreliable. Why? When a student withdraws from a school, he or she is asked to complete a form explaining where he or she is going and what he or she is going to be doing. For those younger than 16 years old, it is illegal to not be in school. Such students are unlikely to report that they are dropping out. They report on the form that they are transferring districts or enrolling in "home schooling." Those older than 16 probably believe it is illegal not to be in school, and in any case have no incentive to report that they are dropping out. School and district administrators have no means by which to follow up on what is reported on the forms. If students don't complete the form, districts are obligated to account for the student somehow. This can be accomplished by actual evidence of a transfer, such as the request of a file by another district or education facility, but also it can be done through a phone call, or a chance meeting. Parents are supposed to sign the form, but this doesn't always happen.

...we believe that many, if not most, of students who drop out report that they are "transferring" or participating in "home schooling"...

We believe that many, if not most, of students who drop out report that they are "transferring" or participating in "home schooling" and districts simply don't have the time, resources, or incentive to follow-up thoroughly. The important point here is that once a student is designated as a "transfer," he or she is edited from the original membership base, as if the student had never been there. **Transfer students are subtracted from the student count, and therefore are excluded from graduation or dropout calculations.**

Transfer data influence graduation statistics as well as dropout statistics. Unlike dropout rates, graduation rates are cumulative, with adjustments to class size being made from 9th through 12th grades. For example, the reported 9th-12th grade graduation rate for the Class of 2001 is 80.5%. This figure is obtained by dividing the number of graduates (39,241 students) by the total number of students the original freshman class, **adjusted for transfer students**. Yet 39,241 students represents only 59% of the original number of students in the 9th grade Class of 2001, leaving approximately 17,791 or 26% of the class unaccounted for. The difference, presumably, would largely be explained as "out-of-state transfers," and here's where the slip comes into play—since transfer students are subtracted from the count, the initial class size of 66,811 is adjusted down to approximately 48,575 students. This adjustment increases the graduation rate from 59% up to 80.5%. But is this plausible? Transfer data would suggest that the 17,791 students who didn't graduate and who didn't drop out moved out of Colorado between fall 1997 and spring 2001—in spite of the fact that student enrollment in the State grew by 5% over that period![22]

[22]Some will argue that the apparently high attrition figure is due to the fact that many students in the Class of 2001 will graduate late, and therefore won't be counted as graduates, even though they remain in the system. However, if this is the case, it is reasonable to expect that there would be a similar number of students from previous classes who would have graduated in 2001, one or more years after their classmates. These late graduators are counted as 2001 grads, and therefore compensate numerically for Class of 2001 students who don't graduate with the rest of their class.

The unreliability of the transfer data creates a systematic **under reporting** of dropout rates and **over reporting** of graduation rates. The difference between reported and actual dropout and graduation statistics cannot be known for sure. What we do know is that through the gap created by reported versus actual statistics, a large proportion of students leak out, unreported, from our high schools.

How many students might we be talking about and who are they?

Predominately, they are low-income, minority, and urban students, whose attrition rates far exceed overall state attrition rates. To illustrate, we looked at attrition rates in seven urban school districts. We identified these districts because each one had a disproportionate number of African-American or Hispanic students enrolled compared to these groups' representation in the state overall. The total number of students within these seven focal districts comprised 23% of all Colorado students in 2000-01. However, students in these districts comprised 62.5% of all African-Americans and 37.5% of all Hispanic students in Colorado. Within these seven districts were represented 88% of all African-Americans and 67.8% of all Hispanics enrolled in the 14 Denver Metro school districts.

We explored attrition in these districts by ethnicity, using statistics provided by CDE.

The following table shows the total size of the freshman class and its breakdown by ethnicity. We also show the number of students who graduated as well as the percentage of students who didn't graduate with their class. In addition, we show the cumulative dropout rate in each district as well as the percentage of students whose attrition cannot be explained by dropout statistics.

Looking at the dropout rates, the reflection on high schools would be bad enough if the numbers were accurate. Cumulative (reported) dropout rates average 15% overall, and tend to be much higher in urban districts, particularly among African-Americans and Hispanics.

But even though **reported** dropout rates reach as high as 30%, the actual figure is undoubtedly much higher. As the table shows, reported dropouts account for only a fraction of total class attrition. Between the 9th and 12th grades, the overall population of the Class of 2001 in Colorado declined across these urban districts by 52.3%. Within sub-populations, attrition was as high as 75%! And yet, overall enrollment (kindergarten through 12th grade) in each district cited in the table **increased** between 1997 and 2001 at an overall average rate of 7%. African-American and Hispanic growth averaged 32.5% across all 7 districts.

Subtracting dropouts, 13%-63% of Class of 2001 students didn't graduate with their classmates. Are we saying that all of the students with unexplained attrition are actually dropouts? No, not at all. Some are not counted as graduates because they've earned their GED, but that only represents 2% of all students in Colorado. Certainly, some students do legitimately transfer into and out of school districts. But given the fact that overall enrollment in these districts grew, the extreme decline of students between 9th and 12th grades simply cannot be attributed to transfers.

...it's appalling. we're losing half of our kids and we don't know where they're going...

We believe that a large proportion of class attrition is the result of students who are designated as "transfers" who have actually dropped out.

The massive attrition we're seeing from high schools, especially among African-American and Hispanic students, is indicative of a system that is seriously wounded. One official said,

> "It's appalling. We're losing half of our kids and we don't know where they're going. A lot of them aren't getting counted as dropouts. I'm highly concerned and I'm angered about how unconcerned others seem to be about this." **Assistant Superintendent of an Urban School District**

We urge educators and policy makers to study the vast and sometimes shocking differences between 9th grade enrollment in a given class and the number of graduates from that class four years later. Annual dropout figures cannot account for the hundreds and sometimes thousands of students who disappear from school districts between 9th and 12th grades. Where are these students? More important, what future do they have, and what are the implications of this for our state?

14

ATTRITION FROM THE CLASS OF 2001 ACROSS 7 FOCAL DISTRICTS & COLORADO**					
DISTRICT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN 9TH GRADE CLASS OF 2001 (1997-98)	NUMBER OF GRADUATES FROM THE CLASS OF 2001	TOTAL ATTRITION FROM THE CLASS OF 2001 (1997-2001)	% CLASS OF 2001 WHO DROPPED OUT BETWEEN 9TH & 12 GRADES	% ATTRITION FROM THE CLASS OF 2001 **NOT EXPLAINED BY DROPOUTS**
ALL COLORADO					
All Students*	66,811	39,241	41.2%	14.6%	26.6%
Anglo	46,319	30,684	33.8%	12.1%	21.7%
African-Am.	4,111	1,681	59.1%	17.7%	41.4%
Hispanic	13,775	5,321	61.4%	23.8%	37.6%
ADAMS 14					
All Students	669	221	67.0%	13.5%	53.5%
Anglo	260	100	61.6%	21.2%	40.4%
African-Am.	24	6	75.0%	12.5%	62.5%
Hispanic	263	110	58.1%	22.4%	35.7%
ADAMS/ ARAPAHOE					
All Students	2,479	1,032	58.3%	15.7%	42.6%
Anglo	1,256	594	52.7%	14.8%	37.9%
African-Am.	650	204	68.6%	14.8%	53.8%
Hispanic	411	157	61.8%	21.9%	39.9%
BRIGHTON 27					
All Students	523	265	49.3%	21.2%	28.1%
Anglo	286	162	43.4%	16.8%	26.6%
African-Am.	4	3	25.0%	0.0%	25.0%
Hispanic	220	92	58.2%	27.7%	30.5%
CHERRY CREEK					
All Students	3,269	2,644	19.1%	5.1%	14.0%
Anglo	2,594	2,134	17.7%	4.2%	13.5%
African-Am.	269	208	22.7%	6.7%	16.0%
Hispanic	200	134	33.0%	10.5%	22.5%

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ATTRITION FROM THE CLASS OF 2001 ACROSS 7 FOCAL DISTRICTS & COLORADO**

DISTRICT	NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN 9TH GRADE CLASS OF 2001 (1997-98)	NUMBER OF GRADUATES FROM THE CLASS OF 2001	TOTAL ATTRITION FROM THE CLASS OF 2001 (1997-2001)	% CLASS OF 2001 WHO DROPPED OUT BETWEEN 9TH & 12 GRADES	% ATTRITION FROM THE CLASS OF 2001 **NOT EXPLAINED BY DROPOUTS**
DENVER					
All Students	7,152	2,585	63.9%	18.2%	45.7%
Anglo	1,793	916	49.0%	10.2%	38.8%
African-Am.	1,590	555	65.1%	16.7%	48.4%
Hispanic	3,405	944	72.3%	23.1%	49.2%
MAPLETON 1					
All Students	507	199	60.8%	16.2%	44.6%
Anglo	307	116	62.2%	19.5%	42.7%
African-Am.	9	5	44.4%	0.0%	44.4%
Hispanic	160	64	60.0%	10.6%	49.4%
SHERIDAN 2					
All Students	235	128	45.6%	23.0%	22.6%
Anglo	128	79	38.3%	18.0%	20.3%
African-Am.	6	4	33.3%	0.0%	33.3%
Hispanic	87	39	55.2%	29.9%	25.3%

* "All Student" totals will be higher than combined totals of Anglo, Hispanic, and African-American students, because students of other ethnicities are included in "All Student" totals; however, Anglo, Hispanic, and African American students comprise over 95% of all students in the state.

**Data collected from CDE *Report of Student Dropout Counts (x District, Ethnicity, & Grade), 1997-2001*; also from CDE *Class of 2001 Graduation & Completion Rates x District and Ethnicity.*

performance declines among those who remain

The ability of high schools to retain students is one indicator of high school health. Another way to understand the health of high schools is to look at the performance of those who remain. A brief look at 2002 CSAP results confirms what other data suggest. As students move from middle school to high school, increasing numbers of students slip below Proficient on CSAP math scores, with 57% scoring less than proficient in 8th grade and 68% scoring less than proficient in 10th grade. While reading achievement over the past two years has improved slightly among Anglo students, it has remained the same for African-Americans and Hispanic students.[23] This trend threatens to widen a gap of already distressing proportions:

- African-Americans 10th graders are nearly **2 times** more likely than Anglos to score below Proficient in reading, and nearly **1.5 times** more likely to score below Proficient in math.
- Hispanic 10th graders are over **2 times** more likely than Anglo students to score below proficient in reading, and **1.25 times** more likely to score below Proficient in math.
- Conversely, 10th grade Anglo students are over **1.5 times** more likely to score Proficient or Advanced on CSAP reading and nearly **5 times** more likely to score Proficient or Advanced on math than African-Americans.
- Anglos in 10th grade are nearly **2 times** more likely to score Advanced or Proficient on reading and **4 times** more likely to score Advanced or Proficient in math than are 10th grade Hispanics.

[23] CDE CSAP 2000 State Summary (Math & Reading).

CSAP PROFICIENCY LEVELS BY ETHNICITY: 2002 10TH GRADE READING					
ETHNICITY	UNSATISFACTORY	PARTIALLY PROFICIENT	PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED	NOT SCORED	TOTAL*
Anglo	6%	17%	73%	3%	101%
African-American	16%	32%	46%	6%	100%
Hispanic	21%	31%	37%	12%	101%

* Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

CSAP PROFICIENCY LEVELS BY ETHNICITY: 2002 10TH GRADE MATH					
ETHNICITY	UNSATISFACTORY	PARTIALLY PROFICIENT	PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED	NOT SCORED	TOTAL*
Anglo	24%	40%	33%	3%	100%
African-American	59%	28%	7%	6%	100%
Hispanic	53%	27%	8%	11%	99%

* Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

School Accountability Reports (SARs) summarize CSAP performance. In 2002, 40% of all of Colorado high schools were rated below **Average**. Among the seven focal districts identified in the previous section, 63% of those districts' high schools fall below **Average**. African-American and Hispanic students are therefore disproportionately represented in high schools performing below average.

A LANGUISHING POLICY AGENDA

Sadly, little is currently being done to address the realities pertaining to high attrition and low achievement outlined in this paper. School district officials have implemented various programs targeted at specific issues or populations from dropout prevention to reading instruction, but data are spare regarding their effectiveness. Such programs, on their own, even if effective, are unlikely to address the systemic inadequacies that manifest in disengagement, poor literacy, poor performance, and low graduation rates, particularly among urban, minority, and low-income students. Some individual programs and isolated reform efforts in some districts hold promise. But such activities take place within a balkanized bureaucracy. Successful efforts at local levels are not likely to be learned of or replicated across districts, and, in some cases, even within a district.

At the state level, the Accreditation Program looks ambitious, but it is primarily an exercise in data collection. The Accreditation Program requires districts to compile annual statistics pertaining to student achievement, school climate, and client satisfaction. These reports disaggregate performance by race and other demographic factors. Much of the data we report in this paper regarding dropouts and low achievement are documented in District Accreditation Reports across the state. Nevertheless, the accumulation of evidence has not prompted state officials to identify or address the systemic issues these poor statistics reflect.

In fact, there is not much beyond identifying the issues that they would have the power to do. The energetic language of the 2001 **Closing the Gap** resolution has not been matched with similarly energetic funding. Over the past two years the task force charged with implementing **Closing the Gap** has approached legislators for funding, and both times funding for the resolution has been denied. In any case, none of the currently proposed programs specifically address high school students. **Closing the Gap** resolution, which purports to bite into education inequities in Colorado, is toothless.

We fear that educators and legislators have accepted low performance as inevitable and have adopted an attitude of complacency and low expectations for high school youth, especially those in urban settings. An example of this can be found by analyzing state expectations pertaining to CSAP performance. Headlines were made when "Unsatisfactory" high schools moved up to "Low" performing. Yet, few of the gains that put "Unsatisfactory" high schools in the "Low" category accrued from instruction. Most gains were made simply by reducing the number of "No

Scores" at each school ("No Scores" are weighted the same as "Unsatisfactory"). "No Scores" were reduced by cleaning up the rolls so that students no longer enrolled were not counted as being enrolled, and by providing incentives for students who were enrolled to show up for the tests. While schools were being rewarded for performing below Average, the percentage of total high schools rated below Average grew from 27% in 2001 to 40% in 2002.

As with any complex issue, there are plenty of reasons and excuses that can be raised regarding why things are as they are. Yet the fact remains: no constellation of policies or strategies exist within Colorado school districts or at the state level targeted at closing an achievement gap that widens as students progress through secondary education. We present these data not to cast blame and not to chastise teachers, administrators, or state officials. Rather, we hope to focus serious attention on a serious problem in order to bring together those who care about our children's education and future, and who are willing to admit that what we're doing the way we're doing it isn't working for large numbers of students who fall out of the system, nor for many who remain in high school through graduation.

...we fear that educators and legislators have accepted low performance as inevitable...

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This report summarizes data relating to high attrition and low performance among high school students that is leading to a widening learning gap between Anglo students and minorities. We cannot attribute such massive losses from high schools, or the declining performance among those who stay, to lack of ability or initiative. Only systemic inequities could produce such consistent and dramatic results. The bottom line is this: how we think about and operate high schools in Colorado isn't meeting the needs of large numbers of students. Furthermore, all evidence suggests that if we keep doing what we're doing the way we're doing it, we will exacerbate a decline that threatens to widen a gap into a chasm.

We believe that a preponderance of evidence surrounding high school attrition and achievement has serious implications for the health of our schools, our children, and the quality of life in Colorado. We have illustrated Colorado's achievement gap by focusing on urban districts with concentrations of students of color. While we have tried to use compelling quantitative indicators to suggest the extent of the problem, at heart we are most concerned about what these numbers suggest in terms of the quality of experience among all Colorado high school students. One national study, for example, found that 40% of high school youth are "disengaged," suggesting that for many students, high school is boring and irrelevant.[24] Is that the kind of experience we want for Colorado's youth? Are these the kinds of outcomes we would expect from a state that advocates that:

> "... Closing the learning gap is an important goal of Colorado's education reform program." **Closing the Gap**, Colorado House Joint Resolution 01-1014.

While we are sobered by the current realities, we firmly believe that they can and must be reversed. We believe this is possible and necessary, and that the need is immediate. We believe that success will depend on stakeholders from several arenas coming together with a willingness to face these issues head on. Clearly, no one person or group either understands all of the underlying issues nor has all of the solutions necessary for addressing the challenges facing secondary education. But many have thoughtful perspectives and advocate promising approaches.

We therefore call for the creation of a Commission dedicated to examining and re-thinking high school education in Colorado and promoting reforms tailored to the needs of individual districts, particularly those in our urban centers. Such a Commission would be comprised of policy makers, business leaders, professors, community leaders, and state and district educators. The Commission would be charged with developing

[24] Heather Voke, Motivating Students to Learn, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), February 2002.

action-oriented, fundable, and immediate strategies to address high school retention and achievement. Specifically, the Commission would:

...while we are sobered by the current realities, we firmly believe that they can and must be reversed...

- Explore the causes of attrition and low achievement among high school students; particularly among minority and/or low-income students in urban districts, and devise creative strategies to promote students' connectedness to school and student retention;
- Create a clearinghouse for high school education that can become a statewide resource for identifying programs that have been successful in raising retention, literacy, and numeracy among 9th-12th graders;
- Use the clearinghouse discussed above to provide resources to enhance schools' and districts' capacity to conduct meaningful research and evaluation activities related to high school improvement programs;
- Strengthen the linkages between high school and post-secondary education through programs that promote high school student advisement throughout 9th through 12th grades, and that promote resources and strategies for guiding students towards college and other post-secondary options.

Real progress on these difficult issues will require the commitment at all levels of the system and from all corners of society. Legislators have to be willing to back up high-flown rhetoric with action and dollars. State-level educators have to create forums within which district leaders, business leaders, professors, community leaders, teachers, parents and children can come together to speak frankly about the myriad of issues underlying ailing high schools, as well as explore strategies to address them.

Business leaders and non-profit foundations can play an important role in moving the policy agenda of high school reform by encouraging the business community to participate in strategies that tighten the links between secondary education and job and career opportunities. Non-profits can help promote innovation, but only if they commit to long-term support.

District-level educators must be willing to embrace reform efforts by demonstrating a willingness to restructure curricula, scheduling, and administrative processes when necessary to meet the needs of students and parents. Furthermore, district and state-level educators must recognize that genuine reform is both fundamental and incremental, and that the most successful approaches alter the school and community expectations. There are no magic formulas or silver bullets: in most cases, substantial results will not be immediate.

The issues we face in Colorado aren't unique. North Carolina, Vermont, Maine and Rhode Island are among a handful of states that have convened blue ribbon panels or other forums to identify the needs directly and indirectly related to high school retention and performance. Concentrated efforts such as these, which transcend district-level funding and political constraints, are necessary if we hope to address the systemic issues that underlie poor high school performance and the widening learning gap between Anglo students and minorities. A commitment to such efforts would constitute our greatest hope. ■

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